

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 MCT-01 OC-06 CCO-00 OPR-02 A-01

CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-07 INR-07 LAB-04 NSAE-00

SIL-01 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 L-03 NSC-05 PA-01

PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 ACDA-07 OES-07 TRSE-00

/092 W

-----093829 270541Z /14

P R 270440Z JUN 77

FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7559

INFO AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE COLOMBO 2200

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, ENRG, PINS, CE

SUBJ: SRI LANKA POWER BLACKOUT

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: SRI LANKA HAS SUFFERED FROM A MAJOR POWER FAILURE, ISLAND-WIDE AT LEAST AT THE START, INDUCED BY TRADES UNION SABOTAGE ON SATURDAY NIGHT. THE ISLAND IS TAKING IT WITH CHARACTERISTIC CALM. END SUMMARY.

2. AT 2000 ON JUNE 25, ELECTRIC POWER WAS EXTINGUISHED ALL OVER THE ISLAND OF SRI LANKA. AS OF 0800 ON JUNE 27 IT HAD ONLY BEEN RESTORED IN INTERMITTENT LOCATIONS, AS EMERGENCY GENERATORS AND OLD POWER STATIONS RECENTLY INOPERATIVE HAVE BEEN PRESSED INTO SERVICE. GOVERNMENT SOURCES PROMISE COMPLETE RESTORATION OF SERVICE BY "TONIGHT", BUT SINCE THEY HAVE BEEN SAYING THIS FOR NEARLY 48 HOURS, ONE MAY BE PARDONED A TOUCH OF SKEPTICISM.

3. THE POWER FAILURE IS CLEARLY DUE TO CLEVER AND DELIBERATE SABOTAGE BY ELECTRICAL TRADE UNIONS. THE ORIGIN OF THIS

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LATEST IN SRI LANKA'S SEEMINGLY ENDLESS ROUND OF WORK STOP-PAGES AND SLOWDOWNS IS THE SUDDEN FIRING ON JUNE 22 OF D.P. CHANDRASINGHE, CHAIRMAN OF THE CEYLON ELECTRICITY BOARD, BY MAITHIRIPOLA SENANAYAKE, MINISTER OF IRRIGATION, POWER AND HIGHWAYS. THE REASON FOR THE DISMISSAL, ADMITTEDLY WITHIN THE MINISTER'S AUTHORITY, APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN LARGELY PERSONAL DIFFERENCES, ON THE NATURE OF WHICH VARIOUS ACCOUNTS

ARE OFFERED.

4. THE NUMEROUS ELECTRICAL UNIONS LAUNCHED A STRIKE ON JUNE 23 TO PROTEST THE REMOVAL OF THE CHAIRMAN, CITING HIM AS A PARAGON OF HONESTY AND EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATION. THE PRESS OF JUNE 24, AND 25, RANG WITH GOVT PROMISES OF NO INTERRUPTION OF SERVICE AND ACCOUNTS OF MOVEMENT OF ARMED FORCES TO MAN AND PROTECT KEY INSTALLATIONS. AT 2000, SATURDAY NIGHT, POWER WAS TURNED OFF ISLAND-WIDE, DESPITE THE PRESENCE OF MILITARY GUARDS.

5. AS SEEMS NORMAL HERE, SRI LANKANS TOOK THE POWER FAILURE CALMLY, STOICALLY AND NOT TOO SERIOUSLY. AT LEAST ONE SERVICE CHIEF DID NOT INTERRUPT HIS WEEKEND VACATION TO COME BACK TO COLOMBO, AND THE POLICE INSPECTOR GENERAL WAS SEEN AT A PARTY THREE HOURS AFTER THE BLACK OUT HAD STARTED, UNAWARE OF HOW EXTENSIVE WAS THE POWER FAILURE AND APPARENTLY IN NO HURRY TO FIND OUT.

6. MEANWHILE THE PERENNIALY NEWSLESS SL BROADCASTING SERVICE MENTIONED THE ELECTRICITY PROBLEM IN TWO SENTENCES AS THE FIFTH OR EIGHTH ITEM IN NEWSCASTS, PROMISING EARLY RESTORATION OF SERVICE AND GIVING NO MENTION OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED OR WHY. APPARENTLY IT WAS TAKEN AS AN ACT OF GOD.

7. IT IS UNCLEAR HOW EXTENSIVE WAS THE SABOTAGE, BUT IT APPEARS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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TO HAVE AT LEAST CENTERED AROUND THE ISLAND'S PRINCIPAL POWER STATION AT LAXAPANA, SOME 50 MILES EAST OF COLOMBO NEAR NORTON BRIDGE. ANOTHER AFFECTED POWER SYSTEM WAS PRESUMABLY THE ONE AT POLPITIYA, ALSO IN THE CENTRAL PROVINCE. THE PRESS ON JUNE 27 ANNOUNCED THAT AGREEMENT HAD BEEN REACHED BETWEEN THE UNIONS AND THE GOVERNMENT, AND THAT THIS WOULD RESULT IN EARLY RESTORATION OF SERVICE, SINCE THE UNIONS PRESUMABLY KNEW WHICH LINES THEY HAD CUT AND WHICH PARTS THEY HAD REMOVED FROM WHAT EQUIPMENT.

8. COMMENT: THE INCIDENT, HOWEVER CALMLY ACCEPTED, BY THE PATIENT SRI LANKAN PUBLIC, CERTAINLY ILLUSTRATES THE CONTINUING VULNERABILITY OF THE ISLAND TO SABOTAGE, HOWEVER MOTIVATED, AND ANY LOCAL ELEMENTS DREAMING OF REPLAY OF THE EVENTS OF THE 1971 INSURGENCY ARE DOUBTLESS TAKING NOTE. THE EFFORT OF THE ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE OF GOVERNMENTAL CIVIL AND MILITARY INEPTITUDE AND IMPOTENCE ON THE COMING ELECTION IS PROBLEMATICAL.
PERKINS

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Message Attributes

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Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 27-Jun-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
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Disposition History: n/a
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